

The Bloomfield Times.

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Editor and Proprietor.

AN INDEPENDENT FAMILY NEWSPAPER.

{ Terms: IN ADVANCE.
One Dollar per Year.

Vol. IV.

New Bloomfield, Pa., September 13, 1870.

No. 37.

The Bloomfield Times.

Is Published Weekly,

At New Bloomfield, Penn'a.

BY

FRANK MORTIMER.

SUBSCRIPTION TERMS.

ONE DOLLAR PER YEAR!
IN ADVANCE.

The India Shawl.

BY M. T. CALDER.

CONCLUDED.

STILL more inquiring my eyes turned to Lady Waldegrave. There was a look of ennui on her face; Gerald was not deep, not intellectual enough to chain her interest, after all. I gave furtive glances at the mirror reflecting the sofa, and Mary's bright busy figure and my dull quiet form. I might have looked worse than I did. A little more "fixing up" about my dress, considerable more effort to please and entertain, and who knows but I might rival Gerald? Oust him from his position as favorite, and show him the folly of his infatuation, so that, knowing the diamond beyond his reach, he might gratefully accept the pearl lying at his feet? I had the advantage of a large experience with the world, and a keen insight into character.—It was worth trying. So ran my thoughts. And I did try.

As soon as the unsocial game of chess was over, I took a portfolio of engravings, and quietly ensconced myself in the chair by Lady Waldegrave's side, left vacant a moment by Gerald's leaving the room. I was amused to see his injured look, when he returned and found her listening, with evident interest, to the story I was relating belonging to the engraving she held in her hand. I kept on quietly, although he stood behind me waiting for me to rise. Fortunately I chanced upon the right subject.—I was telling her of my visit, a long time before, to a little Sicilian town, looking out upon the blue Mediterranean, and under the red eye of Vesuvius. I saw her eye kindle and her bosom heave, as I went on describing my admiration for its scenery, then a tear gathered like a diamond drop on the black iris of her eye, and the beautiful face flushed with a glow of some long repressed emotion.

"Again—tell it again!" she murmured, dreamily, as I pause; "of those pleasant walks by the sea of seas—my dear old Mediterranean!"

I looked up in surprise.

"Then you have visited the town yourself? it is a familiar scene I have been describing?"

She hesitated a moment, then in the soft melodious tones only a native can use, answered, lingeringly fondly over the words, as if they had long been silent and forgotten:

"*Oh! tace confessa!*" And in a moment she added sadly, "It is the town where I was born!"

"Indeed! I was told you were English."

"True; one is English whose parents are born and reside in England, but my heart has its country with the old Italian birth-place."

From that time I had a claim on her notice when I chose, and Gerald grew morose and threatening toward me, and little Allie occasionally laid her soft cheek against mine, in the old childish way, expressing thereby a mute but most eloquent vote of thanks.

However, the scales were evenly balan-

ced. If I could command her interest and attention, and hold her spellbound by the efforts of my intellect and superior tact, Gerald's handsome face and youthful enthusiasm obtained smiles far more captivating, since they were freely bestowed, and not won away from her by a superior will. Moreover, Gerald was thoroughly in earnest, and as for myself, I think she detected my lack of sincerity. She had a wonderful genius, and a quick, keen intellect, and must have divined, intuitively, how little heart was in my efforts to please her. Nevertheless, to tell the truth, it was getting rather dangerous for me. I grew more and more fascinated with her beauty, and so interested in a character, at one time so open and ingenuous, and at another so complex and shrouded, and full of mystery.

Sometimes I would grow startled and believe I had come to love her madly, and I would shrink away from her with a shiver of horror and aversion, unaccountable even to myself. One day, as our party were setting out for the beach, we discovered a tall stout man, with shaggy black whiskers and a fierce mustache, loitering about our boarding-house.

"There's that Whiskerando," said Bell, lightly laughing. "Which of us has he fallen in love with, that he haunts our path so frequently?"

The question was not debatable in my mind, for I saw his bold eyes fixed steadily on Lady Waldegrave, and was confident that a telegraphic signal, or dumb language of the fine fingers, accompanied the gaze. At all events, she grew deadly pale, and pleading a headache, excused herself from the party and returned to her room.

Two hours after, as accident would have it, whom should I meet on a sequestered by-road, where I was riding on horseback, but this same Whiskerando, as Bell aptly christened him, riding in a chaise, with a closely-veiled lady by his side, and on the fair hand resting upon the side of the chaise glittered a diamond and ruby ring I had noticed a hundred times on Lady Waldegrave's slender fingers. "Perhaps she has found her friend," said I, and gave no more thought of it. Yet that evening she was unusually sad and depressed. One other circumstance made that evening remarkable. We were sitting upon the rocks in the moonlight, at full tide, with the rolling waves at our very feet.

"Take care, Allie," said I, as my niece bent forward toying with the waves, and allowing the briny waters, to gurgles through her fingers, "take care—who knows but the Sea King may reach up and clasp your hand, and bear you away before our eyes?"

A soft sigh was my answer, and the words, "It were no great matter. My hand is not worth much."

"Not worth much!" said I, drawing her to my side and spreading out on my palm the rosy dripping fingers. "I wish all the hands in this wave-washed town to-night were as clean and pure as my little Allie's, stained by no deed of guilt or shame."

"Here's another like it," said Gerald, touching reverentially the soft hand lying on the rock, blazing, even in the moonlight, with the gems that circled it.

Lady Waldegrave raised the hand he touched and looked at it askance, as one might do with a treacherous, dangerous serpent, and then I saw it clasp its fellow with a woful despairing gesture that alarmed me.

Quiet Nellie Barrett was the next to speak, with a solemn, thrilling cadence in her pure soprano voice. "Yes, on such a night as this, with the enduring sky, and the mighty eternal sea before us, it is well to remember stainless hands hand and unburdened hearts. How terribly such a scene must jar upon a guilty conscience! The very waves would shriek aloud the hidden crime, and the stars point down like accusing fingers from above."

The quiet homely face of the speaker had caught the highest beauty, the gleam

from within, and we all gazed in respectful sympathy. Was I the only one that saw Lady Waldegrave's eyes turn with a terrified glare upon the heaving sea and the sparkling sky?

"How sombre you are all becoming!" she said. "Pray, Mr. Wayne, let us take a stroll to shake off the shadows."

I do not think the shadows were shaken off, for in the middle of the night I heard Lady Waldegrave's maid at the landlady's door, adjoining mine, asking for an opiate, as her ladyship could not sleep.

The last week of our stay arrived, the chief event of which was a great ball at the—House, for which extensive preparations had been made. Of course our party were all to be present at the distinguished assembly. Just as we left the tea-table that evening, I saw Gerald Wayne present an elegant bouquet of white camellia buds to Lady Waldegrave, and caught her low reply, "You shall have my answer to-night."

My pride was considerably piqued at this. For Allie's sake and Gerald's own future peace of mind, I had hoped to prevent any declaration on his part. There could be little doubt as to the nature of the question, and now I was not so sure of the kind of answer it would receive. So I had thrown myself before the cannon's mouth to little purpose. My own sensations were difficult to analyze. I felt angry, aggrieved, scornful, and reckless, all at once, despising myself, and singularly enough, feeling a lofty contempt for their foolishness.

But all feelings were merged in an exultant sort of pride, when our party entered the fairy-like ball-room, and I caught the low murmur of admiration that greeted the appearance of the ladies. Alice and Bell, in their gossamer robes of tulle and lace, were charming, and the personal appearance of all the others advanced several degrees nearer perfection by the becoming toilet and brilliant lights. But Lady Waldegrave—what pen shall describe her, as a spontaneous burst of delight greeted her appearance? The queenly form was robed in glistening amber satin, softened by flounces of aerial lace, and looped up by what seemed flakes of sparkling light, so vivid were the rays of diamonds and sapphires glittering here and there, around the snowy arms and swan-like throat, and collecting in a tangled spray, like the flash of a summer fountain, amid the masses of ebony hair. She complained of chilliness, and Gerald flew to the drawing-room for her shawl. I heard a whispered comment behind me, as the superb folds of the India shawl were laid gently around the ivory shoulders.

"A real camel's hair. It must have cost seven or eight hundred dollars; and those jewels are genuine diamonds and sapphires. I should think she ought to be a ladyship indeed!" So said a gossip behind me to her neighbor.

The words were like the stroke of magician's wand, only instead of creating splendid visions, it dashed aside a living, breathing embodiment of grace and beauty, and left—a whited wall—a foul, revolting, sin.

"Camel's hair shawl! Diamond and sapphire jewelry! Ladyship! Aha, Gerald Wayne and Lady Waldegrave, enjoy the dance while yet you may!"

And yet the discovery shocked and pained me. I gazed upon the radiant vision.—I had almost loved that woman. Heavens, what a superb actress she was! I did not wish it to be my hand that should dash her down to infamy and disgrace. Such a face—such an angel's aspect! I gasped; and so scheming, and traitorous, and wicked within! Now I could comprehend the nameless antipathy that had chilled my warmest admiration. A hand on my shoulder startled me. I turned round to confront Richard Ellis's excited face. I knew what was coming before he spoke.

"How are you, C. I didn't know you

were down here. Came with my wife yesterday. But look here, here's a pretty go! Do you see that lovely creature in the amber satin over yonder?"

"Yes," I groaned.

"Well, do you see my diamond and sapphire jewelry? It is the very identical beauty who cheated so many of us at home. That bracelet I had already marked, and if the initials G. L. W. are underneath a thin scroll of gold I fastened over them to hide them from any purchaser, then there is evidence enough to send that splendid creature to prison for the rest of her days.—What shall I do? get an officer at once?"

I was too unhappy and perplexed myself to know what was best; but glancing again at the brilliant couple, I saw poor Allie's drooping figure beyond them, the soft blue eyes following wistfully Gerald's animated face. And the sight braced and strengthened me. Very quietly we found a proper officer, and stationed him within call, and then waited till the evening's festivities should close. Once I saw Lady Waldegrave waltzing with that tall dark stranger and from her pallid cheek and his scowling brow, I judged that the relation between them was scarcely pleasant or agreeable. The moment he released her she passed to the dining-room, and fearing to lose sight of her, I followed.

"You have found an acquaintance," said I, nodding towards her late partner. "Is it the friend you were in search of?"

She bent over the bouquet of camellia buds, and answered in a voice so hoarse with pain that I did not recognize it:

"Friend! friend! rather the fiend, who is killing me, body and soul!" And then laughing hysterically, she added, "What have I said? I am half crazed with excitement and wretchedly faint. Find me a glass of wine."

I brought it, and she drank eagerly to the last drop. The color came back to her lips and cheeks, and smiling and gay again she returned to the dancers. Later, when wrapped in the fatal cashmere she emerged from the dressing-room to take the carriage home, I stepped between her and Gerald's proffered arm, so pale myself that she started and faltered, "What has happened?"

I drew her arm in mine notwithstanding Gerald's angry frown, and begging the rest of the party to proceed quietly to the carriages, said a gentleman was waiting to see Lady Waldegrave, and that I would attend her to his presence. Supposing it, at once to be the mysterious friend she was seeking, they made no troublesome inquiries, and departed peaceably.

I led her at once to the private room where Mr. Ellis and the officer were waiting. She glanced from them back to me, and her clasp on my arm made me writhe with pain. Twice her shivering lips motioned for the words, without any audible sound, then she gasped, rather than spoke, "what does this mean?"

I touched the shawl and the glittering jewels significantly. No words were needed. White, rigid and despairing, she sank into the nearest chair. For ten minutes there was utter silence; then she asked, "what will you do with me?"

"She must remain here to-night," interrupted Ellis, "but to-morrow we shall take her to New York."

"But the punishment—the penalty?" said she, turning those wild eyes appealingly to me.

"I cannot tell. If everything is confessed and restored, it may be light."

She caught at the hope eagerly.

"Will you help me? There is a great deal I can tell—of an organized plan pursued in Vienna, Paris and London, and to be detected here in America! He said I was too bold."

I thought I heard a rattling at the door and unlocking it, I looked out into the corridor. It was only the black whiskered man pacing to and fro, with his cigar. I returned to the waiting group, made a few

arrangements with Ellis for her personal comfort, and approaching the trembling frightened woman, said, simply, "Good-night!" She stared wildly, caught my hand in hers, and looking up into my face, said piteously:

"Why do you shrink so from my touch? Think charitably of me, if you can. I have been controlled by an iron hand, educated to this life from my very childhood. But lately my soul has been aroused, and my heart revolted from the wicked task. I might have been safe now. I was warned a week ago to leave Newport, but my mad love for you kept me here. I tried to win you by exciting your jealousy. This very night Gerald Wayne laid his hand and fortune at my feet, and I refused them, for your sake. It is hard to be scorned and loathed by you—ay, even brought to shameful discovery through your means. Too late for hope now! The die is cast—and how have I loved you all the while!"

I felt my rectitude and manliness giving way beneath the appalling gaze of those lustrous and soul-stirring eyes, and tearing my hand away from her frantic grasp, hurried home, without daring to trust myself to another look. Restless and miserable, with a sad consciousness of something terrible brooding over me, I tossed too and fro upon my bed, for what was left of the far-spent night. At length just after the sun rose, I fell into an uneasy sleep, from which I was aroused by a hand on my forehead. Springing up I met Richard Ellis's glance of horror.

"She is dead—she has poisoned herself!" he said.

"Just Heaven!" I cried. And in a moment more we were hurrying back to the hotel.

It was too true. No words can paint my feelings, as I entered the room where lay the stiff, rigid, distorted form of her who had glided among the dancers but yesterday, the admired and envied, the observed of all observers.

"Who has seen her since I left?" demanded I.

"No one except a stout black whiskered man, who came to the door, saying she was a relation of his, and he would like to speak with her a moment," answered Ellis. "He didn't seem to be at all aware that she was a prisoner, and I thought there was no harm in it. We were in the room, and he only stayed a moment or two. I didn't hear what they said, they talked so low. We left a little while after."

I went immediately in search of him, but he was not to be found. He had left in the night. I believed then, and I shall always believe, that Lady Waldegrave, or rather Beatrice Romant, for that was her true name, was poisoned by that man mixing a powder with the wine in the glass standing on the table, knowing doubtless, her habit of depending upon such stimulants. I was confident she had the power of exposing his criminality, since some one must have prepared the counterfeit notes which she had so often and successfully passed; and probably her death was the only way to silence the accusations, and save his proceedings from exposure. Still nothing certain was ever ascertained. A sinful mystery had accompanied her life, a wicked mystery shrouded her death.

Gerald Wayne was the only one of our company to whom I confided the circumstances accident had revealed to me. The others were too much overcome with consternation and horror, at the news of her sudden death, to trouble me with inquiries.

Six weeks ago my little Alice became the wife of Gerald Wayne, a wiser and better man for that perilous passionate experience I trust. And as for me—why, I am here in my office, a lonely, forlorn old bachelor still, who goes regularly the first Sunday of every month to hang a wreath of evergreen upon a broad black slab, in that quiet churchyard, the only one that bears a single name—"Beatrice."